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Intelligence Overseers Cite Progress

Many CIA Faults Corrected, House Members Say

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The last year was a bruising one for the CIA. The intelligence agency came under attack in Congress and elsewhere for being out of control for such ventures as mining the Nicaraguan port of Corinto and issuing a guerrilla warfare manual that seemed to advocate political assassination.

Yet to talk to some of the outsiders who probably know the CIA best—senior members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence—this has been a bum rap.

A majority of the House panel will go on to other assignments this month under a House rule that limits service on the committee to six years. This graduating class includes some of the sharpest critics of the agency's performance, particularly in Central America over the last two years.

But interviews with this group, five Democrats and three Republicans, show that, despite recent events, they believe that the agency is no longer the uncontrollable "rogue elephant" of the 1960s and 1970s, when it spied on U.S. citizens, conducted illegal wiretaps and intercepted mail. It was also involved in two assassination plots against foreign leaders.

The House panel, and its Senate counterpart, were set up after these revelations to monitor and rein in the CIA.

"The CIA is a lot better and more capable than I believed when I went on the committee," said Rep. Albert Gore Jr. (D-Tenn.), a moderate Democrat who is leaving the committee and the House because he was elected to the Senate. "It's a new era. Those excesses of the past are extremely rare—the so-called 'rogue elephant' syndrome."

And Rep. G. William Whitehurst (R-Va.) said, "I think the agency has made some mistakes but no more than any other agency in this city."

At the same time, however, there is frustration over what some members say have been intentional efforts to hide information involving controversial programs, such as covert CIA-supported action against the leftist government of Nicaragua. And there is strong sentiment that careful congressional oversight is needed to curb potential excesses by the agency.

"I'm supportive of the CIA but [under its current director William J. Casey] . . . we have to dig, probe, kick, cajole in order to get the facts," said Rep. Norman Y. Mineta (D-Calif.), who came onto the committee when it was set up in 1977.

"Even when we get the responses," he added, "there's a suspicion about whether it's the right answer . . . . You have to ask the right question and you don't know whether you're getting an honest answer and you don't know whether the answer will be the same tomorrow."

Democrats, in general, said they believe that this problem has been worse under Casey and the Reagan administration. Republicans said the problem was most severe under Democratic President Jimmy Carter's CIA, run by Stansfield Turner.

"We found that unless we asked Stan Turner the right questions we didn't get any answers," said Rep. C.W. Bill Young (R-Fla.). "They had a classification—royal [for the president]—that they didn't even tell us about . . . . We heard through sources about royal."

The lawmakers said that there has always been a tentativeness in the relations between the CIA and the committee. Initially, especially, the intelligence agency was reluctant to divulge sensitive information, particularly about covert operations.

"The intelligence community operated almost forever without having to report to anyone," Young said. "In the beginning they looked on us as something they had to put up with."

"It was awkward," said Rep. Wyche Fowler Jr. (D-Ga.). "We didn't know what to ask and they didn't know what to answer. We learned to ask questions."

Though an intelligence committee assignment now is quite coveted, then it was not. Many lawmakers were put off by the cloak-and-dagger world, the demands of the committee, and the strict secrecy rules binding members.

"When I first came onto the committee, what I knew about the agency was what I'd seen in the movies, read in books, heard in the [congressional investigations]," Young said. But, he added, "it's not James Bond stuff . . . . It's not fun. You sit there long hours. We can't talk about it. We can't use it politically."

Young said that as a result of his tenure on the committee he has come to see the world as divided between the "black world, the intelligence world" and "the regular world that all of us live in."

Whitehurst recalled his first confidential briefing by then-CIA Director Turner. "I almost got physically ill afterward. Emotionally I was bothered by it, concerned I might let it slip out."

Said Mineta: "When I first came on the committee Jim Johnson, a conservative from Colorado [who had been on the special House panel looking into CIA abuses in 1976], told me, 'The CIA . . . they're the enemy. They're bad, bad men.' I thought he was crazy," Mineta recalled recently. "A year later I went

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r to him and said, you know . . . you're right."

Under laws governing the CIA, Congress is supposed to be kept fully informed in a timely manner of intelligence activities. Congress does not have approval power over specific CIA operations but the congressional oversight process has had some success trimming actions or blocking them altogether by communicating members' feelings to the president.

For instance, a year or so ago the committee expressed strong disapproval of a covert operation against the leftist government of Suriname in South America and it was not pursued, members said. In general, the committee has been much less enamored than CIA officials with proposals for covert and paramilitary operations, members said.

Congress also controls the agency's purse strings and as a last resort can use the power to force changes. Last year, the House intelligence panel led the successful congressional effort to cut off all funding for the CIA-backed rebels fighting the leftist government of Nicaragua.

Several lawmakers said the CIA learned to be more forthcoming after discovering that the committee, which meets in a secure, guarded room on the fourth floor of the U.S. Capitol, could be trusted. One committee member said he believes that the CIA tested the committee in the beginning by giving it information about a former congressional colleague's links to a foreign government to see if the information would be leaked. The committee apparently passed the test, the member said.

Although relations between the CIA and its congressional overseers have never been particularly warm, they have soured decidedly in the last few years because of conflict over the Reagan administration's covert efforts in Nicaragua.

"Until we hit Central America the committee was truly a bipartisan instrument of oversight in the House," said Whitehurst. "But after Reagan adopted a more activist role in Central America . . . the committee fractured right down partisan lines . . . .

"I think the committee lost something when that happened. I'm not sure when it'll be recovered. I found it very discouraging . . . . At one point I thought of resigning from the committee," he said.

The committee members, particularly Democrats, blame much of the recent rocky relationship on Casey, who they said has an abrupt manner and gave many members the feeling that the congressional oversight process was at best an annoyance, at worst an interference.

Young, who complained about Turner answering questions under Carter, said, "We had the same problem initially with Casey . . . . It was my job to explain that things would be better if there was a more open relationship. People felt if they didn't ask the right question they didn't get an answer."

In addition, Casey tended to mumble when he testified before the committee. Some members felt that was done intentionally to conceal information. Young said Casey eventually was given a special microphone at committee hearings.

Mineta said he believes that Casey and other CIA officials have not kept the committee fully informed in a timely manner, even when they asked just the right question.

For instance, he said the committee had heard through back channels in mid-1982 of a national security planning group directive designed to pressure Mexico to support the administration's policies in Central America and Nicaragua.

"For a year we were asked about it and couldn't get it . . . . They'd said there's no such document," Mineta said. Then, "the whole thing appeared in The New York Times. And it's not like Casey could say he doesn't know about [it]—he's director of central intelligence for the whole country and sits on the National Security Council in addition to being director of the CIA."

Mineta, who repeatedly has called for Casey's resignation, said he is concerned that Casey's stewardship may allow the excesses of the past to creep back into CIA operations.

The discontent with the CIA's current stewardship at times has been bipartisan.

For instance, at one point last spring, when CIA involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan waters became public, a junior GOP member of the committee, Rep. William F. Goodling (R-Pa.), was so upset with Casey that he is reported to have called on the director to resign "for the good of the CIA and the good of the country."

Goodling, who has since resigned from the committee, said recently, "The operation, it seemed to me, would've worked better with the director working in some other capacity in the administration . . . . You had the feeling of someone who is very, very busy, who was saying to himself, 'I got to be here but I don't have to listen.' "

Disclosure of the mining produced a bipartisan uproar on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence as well.

An equally significant portion of the current wariness between the House committee and the CIA stems from the belief among panel Democrats in particular that the administration is using the agency rather than diplomatic channels or more overt methods to press its Central American and Nicaraguan policies.

"The CIA is prohibited from setting policy . . . . The grave temptation is to use [it] as an instrument of foreign policy, military policy, as a routine matter rather than as a last resort," Fowler said.

"Casey is the first director of the CIA on the National Security Council. That's policy-making. Our problem . . . is that we so strongly disagree with the policy. We especially disagree with using the CIA as an instrument of the policy."

Even with the tensions of the last two years, most departing members of the committee are reluctant retirees. Several hoped House rules would have been changed to allow them to stay on the panel for another two-year term.

Republicans and Democrats alike said they will miss the excitement of knowing the nation's most closely held secrets. And they voiced concern that such a massive departure from the committee in the short term will make the committee less effective at performing needed oversight.

"The six-year rotation is good on one level—no one can become a tool of the intelligence community," said Young. "But right now I would argue against it because I would like to stay on. I have a store of knowledge that will take new members several years to develop."